



# Back to the Basics: The Noncommissioned Officers' Corps

by First Sergeant Keith J. Santos

Looking back over the past 20 years, there have been many changes in our Army. We have grown smaller, not an idle or mistaken choice of words, as reducing the size of a force is a simple matter of cutting troops. The Army has built down, shifting in basing, force structure, missions, and culture. Transformation is, therefore, not a new thing for us. The Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) and the Objective Force were mere concepts not long ago. The SBCT certification exercise is being completed here at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) as I write this article.

Overall, the changes that have taken place in the Army have been positive. Increased mobility and flexibility, digitized command and control, and the lethality of joint combined arms effects recently demonstrated their significance in Afghanistan and Iraq. But as our Army moves forward, we need to be certain that we preserve what is important, and correct those areas that need fixing. For the noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps, we need to revalidate our basic values.

Our society has become much more individually centric — our Army refers to

itself as an “Army of One.” In that transformation, NCOs have slipped in their roles as leaders of soldiers. It is perfectly evident here at the JRTC and in garrison. Using an after-action review (AAR) approach, we need to stop and ask where and when did we lose focus on what it means to be a noncommissioned officer — a leader of soldiers.

As observer controllers (OCs), we are not above the rest of the Army. We have years of experience as troop leaders, and as such, this AAR applies to us as well. We speak from that experience and our expertise as OCs in saying that junior NCO ranks of E-5 and E-6 are due for a renaissance of leader values — team leaders and squad leaders need to get back to basics. This not only means understanding responsibilities and duties, it requires identifying shortcomings in meeting challenges and correcting those failings. If the NCO corps will take these steps now, we will become better and stronger than ever as the backbone of the Army.

## Remain Tactically and Technically Proficient

During one of my most memorable rotations, I was talking to a dismounted squad that was pulling security along the

flanks of an assembly area. What initially caught my eye about the squad's deployment was their use of terrain: they were in a low area and could not possibly see their area of responsibility. But they were on the flank. The squad leader did not have the experience to adjust the position based on the local terrain. Yet, as I talked with one of the soldiers about how they were set up, I noticed another soldier, a specialist, who had a compass on his load carrying equipment (LCE). I asked him if he knew the proper way to use and hold the compass. He responded that he knew how to use it. But when I asked if he knew the proper way to hold and use the compass, he admitted that he did not. His sergeant then looked at me and remarked, “that is a board question,” as if I had somehow tricked his young troop. I told both of them, the sergeant and his soldier, that knowing how to hold and use a compass is not a question reserved for boards to trip up the unwary. But it is a common 10-level soldier skill. What really stuck with me in this exchange was how did an infantry squad leader come to believe that? Who, if anyone, told him that a compass was something only to remember when studying for promotion? Who, if anyone, showed him what right looks like when it comes

to using a compass? Sad to say, he probably got that very question on a board and he probably answered it correctly, without having to demonstrate that he actually knew what he was talking about. Is this what NCOs refer to as “remaining tactically and technically proficient?”

Over the years, we have seen a great many and many great noncommissioned officers at the JRTC. Of the latter, there have been those who understand and aspire to lead, those who have already perfected the art. Of the former, there have been many who could be great leaders, given the proper guidance, mentoring, and most importantly, experience to develop as NCOs. And then there are those who should have never put on NCO stripes. They are, gratefully, in the minority. But there are still too many junior NCOs who need assistance in developing as leaders.

In examining soldiers who lack leadership, we have to ask if an NCO failed them along the way. Most failures at the JRTC stem from lack of guidance, experience, and subsequently knowing what right looks like. Any soldier can go to a

promotion board and pass. All you have to do is memorize a study guide. But can you apply what you have memorized for the board? That is the fundamental measure of tactical and technical proficiency.

### **Soldiers Are Entitled to Outstanding Leadership**

One cold winter morning, one of my fellow OCs and I walked around and talked to soldiers who were gathered in an assembly area. We noticed a soldier on the perimeter behind a ground-mounted .50-caliber machine gun. The young soldier looked bewildered. Intrigued, we asked him what he was doing, to which he replied, “Watching the road.” We then asked if he knew how to use the .50-caliber. He said “no,” and explained that his NCO had just put him on the position. We sought the NCO responsible and asked him why he had a soldier on a .50-cal who didn’t know how to operate it. The NCO, a staff sergeant, replied, “He had a class on it. He is just being a knucklehead.” Then we asked the harder questions: “Did you really teach the soldier or just go through the motions? Did the soldier practice with

it? Did you test him on it? Did you supervise while he was doing it and make corrections to ensure he meets the standard?” To all, he answered, “No!” The staff sergeant had forgotten the NCO promise that “soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership — I will provide that leadership.”

Leaders ensure that basic soldier skills remain the norm. Basic soldiering means returning to the basics. There is nothing fancy or secret about basics — precombat inspections (PCIs) and precombat checks (PCCs) are basics. At best, they are boring and often painful tasks. It is for that reason that they are one of the most missed and overlooked tasks. Leaders do not allow PCIs and PCCs to slip. This starts at the lowest level as soon as a mission is received. All soldiers should be moving and checking equipment. And NCOs should be right behind them double-checking, giving guidance and ensuring that all tasks are done to standard with no short cuts. Performing PCIs and PCCs early means mistakes are corrected early — before they cost lives. When in combat, we must be able to use all as-

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signed weapons. This means having all needed equipment and the knowledge necessary to use it effectively.

### Set the Standard; Set the example

Early one morning, I noticed a soldier walking across an open field during logistics operations. He had no LCE, no personal weapon, and the chinstrap of his Kevlar was swinging in the breeze. I stopped him, intending to ask what he was doing. To my surprise, the soldier was a staff sergeant. When I mentioned his chinstrap swinging, he grew irritated, abruptly grabbed his strap, and snapped it. I told the sergeant he didn't have to snap it; I was just making an observation. I saw him about 15 minutes later. He again had the chinstrap undone and still was without LCE or personal weapon. He did not adhere to the NCO dictum, "no one is more professional than I."

"Set the example," "lead by example," "set the standard," and "enforce the standard," are phrases we use daily. But do we mean them? Do we adhere to what they mean? Do we measure ourselves against those same standards? And if we do, how do we hold up? Soldiers will do as we do, if we do as we say. If we are not setting standards and adhering to them, then our soldiers will do the same no matter how severely we enforce them. NCOs who serve as the standard, teach soldiers what looks right. Good soldiers, and most are, will follow that correct model. They will be happier in doing so because positive behavior generates pride. That is why we have standards in the first place. They help maintain good order and discipline — if they are enforced. Failing to set standards, or failing to enforce standards, means losing order, discipline, and worst of all, control. We all learn this early in our careers, which is why we decide to stay and become professional leaders. If you allow yourself to slip, you are failing yourself and every soldier who sees you. If you allow your soldiers to slip, you are no less guilty.

### Accomplishing the Mission and Taking Care of Soldiers

It would be unfair if I failed to tell you about the positive efforts of NCOs. It was



afternoon, and I was in the assembly area talking with the first sergeant and XO, when a soldier came running down the hill, breathing heavily, and fell almost at my feet. I looked closer and noticed that it was the motor sergeant. All he could muster was, "I'm alive, but wounded. We were ambushed near Youngstown!" After being treated, he had run 1,200 meters cross-country to warn his leaders about the situation near the town. His warning saved further loss, because other units were prohibited from going through the town until it was secure. Later, all soldiers inside the town evacuated. Vehicles and supplies were recovered. The motor sergeant had remembered, "my two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind; accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my soldiers."

Regardless of changes in the Army, the NCO remains the link between the conceptual and the physical. NCOs make things happen and that remains the bedrock purpose for the NCO corps. Implicit in that fundamental are some of the things I have mentioned in this article. As NCOs, we need to step up to the plate and lead by example. This means setting and enforcing the standards. It means choosing the hard right and not the easy wrong. We are teachers, coaches, and mentors for our own successors. We learned what right looks like from our predecessors —

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we are bound to do the same for our young NCOs and soldiers. If we use the basics to guide us, we will get it right.



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